

WASHINGTON TIMES

3 September 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 5A

Algeria backs Tunisia after Libyan threat

By Bill Kritzberg
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Algerian President Chadli Ben Jedid made a surprise visit to Tunis yesterday and pledged support for Tunisia against Libya, according to official Tunisian sources.

The sudden visit came a day after reports of a failed coup attempt against Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi. News reports in Egypt said the coup was triggered by Col. Qaddafi's order to the armed forces to invade Tunisia.

Reports said Libyan military commanders disobeyed the order and tried unsuccessfully to overthrow Col. Qaddafi.

One Western observer said the report, which was not carried by either the Tunisian or Libyan state-controlled news agencies, was "unlikely." But in Cairo, Egyptian Prime Minister Kamal Hassan Ali described the Libyan situation as "unstable."

"The big pressures put by the Libyan government on the Libyan people are bound to cause an explosion," Mr. Ali said.

Mr. Ali did not confirm or deny the mutiny report, which the Al Ahram newspaper said Sunday was crushed by Col. Qaddafi's personal guard.

Western and Arab diplomatic sources refused to comment on the reports this weekend.

A total of 43 senior army and air force officers were arrested and are awaiting

trial, Al Ahram said. Middle East experts said the Tripoli-dated story appeared to have been leaked to Al Ahram by a branch of the Egyptian government, possibly the intelligence service.

Mr. Ben Jedid and three top cabinet ministers flew to Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba's palace in Monastir for the talks and returned to Algeria less than three hours later.

At the same time, Gen. Youssef Barakat, Tunisia's armed forces chief of staff, flew to Algiers for talks with his Algerian counterpart, Maj. Gen. Mustofa Ben Louzif.

A government spokesman said Mr. Ben Jedid told Mr. Bourguiba that "Algeria will always be at Tunisia's side in any circumstance," and said he reaffirmed military and economic support for Tunisia under a 1983 treaty linking the two countries and Mauritania.

Tunisia's relations with Libya have deteriorated since Libya ordered the expulsion of more than 27,000 Tunisian workers Aug. 5. On Saturday, Tunis protested to Tripoli for the second time in two weeks that its airspace was violated by Libyan planes.

Tunisia has said the expulsion of its workers is an attempt by Col. Qaddafi to destabilize Bourguiba's pro-Western government.

Tunisia responded to the expulsions by expelling 253 Libyan students and 30 Libyan diplomats for alleged espionage activities.

More than 28,500 Tunisians have been expelled by Libya since Aug. 6, according to Tunisian officials. Tunisia mobilized its armed forces twice last month after Col. Qaddafi threatened to use force if Tunisia did not halt "anti-Libyan propaganda" being broadcast from Tunis.

This article is based in part on wire reports.